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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001457

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TAGS: [PARM](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MURR REBUFFS REQUEST THAT LAF ACT
AGAINST MILITIA BUILDING

REF: BEIRUT 1435

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) In a 9/20 meeting with the Ambassador, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Murr agreed that March 8 forces and their allies were better armed, equipped, and trained than the March 14 bloc, should street violence break out. He concurred that Marada leader Suleiman Franjieh and, to a lesser extent, Michel Aoun were preparing for offensive operations, whereas March 14 leaders were engaged more in contingency preparations for self-defense. He thought that March 8-Aoun forces would wait for a March 14 provocation, such as electing a president without a two-thirds quorum, before acting. But he resisted the Ambassador's call for the LAF to move now in cracking down on militia-type activity. Because of the likely political fall-out, the LAF can only move against armed elements once something has happened, he argued. Regarding the assassination the previous day of MP Antoine Ghanem, Murr said that, inside Lebanon, only Hizballah would have the capability to do the surveillance and launch what Murr said was a sophisticated attack. He repeated his earlier pitch for the USG to consider LAF Commander Michel Sleiman's presidential prospects, arguing that Sleiman, alone of the candidates, has defied Hizballah, by entering Nahr al-Barid camp. End summary.

EVERYONE'S DOING IT, BUT MARCH 14 ACTIONS DEFENSIVE,
WHILE MARCH 8-AOUN ACTIONS OFFENSIVE IN NATURE

¶2. (S) On 9/20, the Ambassador met with Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Murr to raise deep concern about the increasing and alarming reports of militia-building in Lebanon. The reports and rumors are too frequent and too detailed to be dismissed out of hand, the Ambassador said, pointing with particular concern to activities by Marada leader Suleiman Franjieh, MP Michel Aoun, Druse ex-Minister Wi'am Wihab, and others. Murr readily agreed. While "everyone" is re-arming, he drew a sharp distinction between the activities of Walid Jumblatt, Samir Geagea, and Saad Hariri, compared to what Franjieh in particular was doing. The March 8-Aoun forces are better armed, equipped, and trained than March 14 forces.

¶3. (S) Jumblatt, Geagea, and Hariri are distributing light weapons and in a limited way, Murr said, with Geagea and Jumblatt constrained financially. What they are doing is

making contingency plans, clearly defensive in nature, Murr said. Franjieh, on the other hand, is acquiring from Hizballah enormous amounts of weapons, distributing them to his followers and to Michel Aoun's supporters. The recent offices that Franjieh's Marada party have opened in Mt. Lebanon are meant to be militia training centers and weapons depots, Murr claimed (in a remarkably similar allegation to what Samir Geagea -- who once tried to assassinate Elias' father Michel -- told us separately, reftel). Aoun is not moving quite so aggressively, Murr said, because he deludes himself into thinking that the LAF is his own private militia that will side with him in any street clashes. Murr waved away the Ambassador's questions about whether Aoun sympathizers inside the LAF might mean that Aoun's assumptions are closer to reality rather than to fantasy: "(LAF Commander) Sleiman hates Aoun," he pronounced, as if that closed the topic.

MARCH 8-AOUN WON'T ACT
WITHOUT MARCH 14 PROVOCATION

14. (S) Murr said that he did not believe that the March 8-Aoun forces would act except if March 14 did something that would trigger a response. If March 8-Aoun forces initiated violence now, they would lose popular support as no one wants violence. But if March 14 would elect a president without a two-thirds quorum, then "I am certain" March 8-Aoun forces will move to take over key parts of the country. "They will claim to be protecting the constitution, after March 14 ignored the constitution," Murr said (indicating that he shares March 8's constitutional interpretation). In the case of a March 14 presidential election, then even Hizballah

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would have the excuse to exercise its militia muscle. March 14 might have the presidency, but March 8-Aoun forces will have the upper hand on the ground. The LAF would likely split along March 8-Aoun and March 14 grounds or become passive.

MURR RESISTS REQUEST TO MOVE
NOW AGAINST MILITIAS

15. (S) The Ambassador urged Murr to help prevent such a scenario. Since Murr claimed to have solid information about Franjieh's activities, couldn't some of Franjieh's arms distributors be picked up now, as deterrent? Couldn't Franjieh's new Marada offices be raided, to search for weapons? No one would dare defy the LAF, particularly after the enormous public support the army received after the Nahr al-Barid fight, and LAF action now could greatly reduce the current scramble for arms and training. The LAF could prevent a catastrophe from unfolding before violence breaks out. The LAF should act now, while there is still time.

16. (S) Murr shook his head. Politically, he could not ask the army to move against Franjieh, without Franjieh having instigated something first. An unprovoked LAF raid would endanger the army's unity. The Ambassador said that, if everyone is truly distributing illegal arms, then perhaps the LAF could pick up some arms dealers from all of the major players for cover, while concentrating on breaking up the Marada network. Murr asked rhetorically if the Ambassador could imagine the outcry from the March 14 leaders, should the LAF move against Jumblatt, Geagea, and Hariri, even if the real target was Franjieh and Aoun. If Franjieh moves, then the LAF can react against him. At the point Franjieh launches an attack, "we'll close down every Marada office in the country," Murr boasted.

17. (S) But, the Ambassador persisted, isn't it better to prevent Franjieh from moving at all? After all, if Franjieh only moves on the pretext of a March 14 provocation, then Murr himself has expressed concern about a potential split in

the LAF at that point. Murr resisted stoutly, saying disengenuously that the Internal Security Forces (ISF, considered to be biased in favor of March 14) should be responsible for any police work. (Comment: Because March 8-Aoun propaganda about the ISF being a "Sunni militia" has taken root in Christian and Shia quarters, an ISF raid on Franjeh's installations or, worse, Aoun would be seen as entirely politically motivated and not related to genuine law enforcement. End comment.)

GHANEM'S ASSASSINATION: IN LEBANON,
ONLY HIZBALLAH HAS THE CAPACITY

18. (S) Seeing further pursuit of LAF action against militias as futile, the Ambassador asked Murr his views of the assassination of MP Antoine Ghanem the previous day. "This was a clear message to Lebanon," Murr said; "elect a president with 50 percent plus one, and here's the response." Murr went into a long explanation of Ghanem's last 48 hours. While he decried what he described as Ghanem's poor security practices ("why did he visit his friend, rather than have his friend come see him?", referring to Ghanem's last meeting), Murr also argued that the attack was sophisticated, "like the ones against me (on 7/12/05), Gebran (Tueni, killed 12/12/05), and Hariri." Ghanem had to be surveilled, the booby-trapped car had to be properly equipped and placed, look-outs were stationed in key places, and so on. In Lebanon, he said, only Hizballah has that capability. Even if the Fatah al-Islam experience is forcing the Lebanese to consider that the al-Qaida-like cells in the Palestinian camps are better equipped than originally thought, Fatah al-Islam would not think of going after Ghanem. Murr predicted that, if the truth is ever discovered about Ghanem and the other attacks, "Hizballah's fingerprints will be everywhere."

ANOTHER PITCH FOR MICHEL SLEIMAN

19. (S) Murr then raised the candidacy of LAF Commander Michel Sleiman for the presidency, expressing concern that the USG is lukewarm on Sleiman. After repeating the usual

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caveats about how the U.S. does not have candidates or vetoes in the presidential race, the Ambassador explained that we did not see any genuine, Lebanese consensus for the constitutional amendment needed to allow Sleiman to become president. Nor did we see a genuine consensus behind Sleiman himself, although we would certainly respect a truly made-in-Lebanon decision in his favor, should one emerge.

110. (S) Murr argued that we should look again at Sleiman. Remember, Murr admonished, Sleiman openly defied Hizballah's "red lines," by going into Nahr al-Barid despite Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's televised demand that

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the army not enter the camp. What other candidates have contradicted Hizballah by their actions, he asked. Moreover, Sleiman ignored Syrian orders to prevent the massive spring 2005 demonstrations, including the March 14 rally that hastened Syria's military withdrawal from Lebanon. Sleiman oversaw the historic LAF deployment to the south. Yes, the Ambassador said, but in all of those cases Sleiman was not the primary decision maker. Murr, aided by pressure from lower-ranking officers in the LAF, provided the orders and leadership for the LAF's entry into Nahr al-Barid, not Sleiman, who seemed ready to call it quits early in the fight. As president, who will push Sleiman in the right direction, the Ambassador asked. Murr said that "the same support structure" would work with Sleiman in Baabda Palace, hinting that he trusted his own influence over Sleiman would continue and be strong.

¶11. (S) "Think about it," Murr urged. In any case, the USG should help make sure that the president is elected from Mt. Lebanon, he argued. The Mt. Lebanon constituency is largely Christian and largely western in orientation, despite the current aberration of some Mt. Lebanon Christians' support of Michel Aoun. Those characteristics will be an insurance policy of sorts about the new president's policies. If, on the other hand, the president is from the south, north, or Biqa' instead, then Syrian and Hizballah influence over him increases. (See septel for a subsequent meeting with Murr, in which Murr criticizes one of the Biqa' candidates, Robert Ghanem, as being Syria's secret choice.)
FELTMAN